ANALYSIS OF COMMON ERRORS IN WRITING - A TOOL FOR BETTER TEACHING/LEARNING OF ESL: A CASE STUDY OF AMITY UNIVERSITY

MADHYA PRADESH

SUDHA MISHRA

Assistant Professor, Amity University Madhya Pradesh, Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

Effective writing is a creative and complex process. Fruitful communication cannot be achieved unless the writer has "grammar proficiency". Teaching writing skills requires very committed and perseverant teachers. Indeed, a lot of time is exhausted on detection and rectification of the grammatical errors. Therefore it becomes one of the most difficult tasks to teach writing, particularly in an ESL classroom. Moreover, the learners' perceptions of grammatical difficulty are influenced by several factors including their school education, social backgrounds and the mother tongue influence. This paper intends to categorize the most common areas of errors in writing among ESL students, and to propose remedial measures to help them overcome these difficulties. The case study scrutinizes 70 writing assignment scripts of second and third year students pursuing UG Courses in Engineering, Law, Journalism and Biotechnology at Amity University. The students were asked to write 2 essays, and 30 sentences were given for error detection and correction. The students' errors were categorized and examined. Furthermore, a questionnaire enquiring learners' perceptions of grammatical difficulty was also filled by the students. The study concludes with didactic suggestions.

KEYWORDS: Inter-Lingual Errors, Intra-Lingual Errors, Language Transfer, Writing Lab

INTRODUCTION

Researchers in the area of learning and teaching English as a Second Language have conducted studies on the performance of the learners in order to reach a better answer to the question as to how learners process the language. Despite the multitude of English medium schools and awareness of the importance of this global language in India, we, the teachers at university level are still struggling with the poor writing skills of the students. This is invariably mirrored on the other courses by exigency of their requirements of continuous writing activity in examinations and assignments.

Knowledge and understanding in the domain subjects of the students are for the most part demonstrated and appreciated via the medium of writing. Therefore, an investigation into the common errors made by the students while writing may help in finding the remedial measures that can lift the students' level not only in English, but also in other subjects too.

Now that we know that problems exist basically in writing, if we have a repository of possible problems beforehand, we might be able to develop a more focused strategy of teaching. This paper is an outcome of the concern and attempt to identify the problem and to recognize the prime concerns to ESL writing with a view to create a repository of common problem areas for reference before lesson planning and to propose a remedial course of action that may help the students in expressing themselves better in examinations and assignments.

METHODOLOGY

The sample of the research is 70 writing-assignment scripts. The subjects of the study are the students of second and third year pursuing UG Courses in Engineering, Law, Journalism and Biotechnology at Amity University. The subjects belong to different socio-economic backgrounds, and have different levels of language competence varying from rudimentary to advance. These learners have finished 12-14 years of English language instruction at school and are taking English/ Communication Skills as a compulsory course at UG level. The subjects were given the following assignments:

Q.1 Correct the following sentences. (30 sentences for error detection and correction)

Q.2 Write an essay on Peer Pressure/ Future of Journalism in India.

Q.3 Write a letter to the Director Administration of your institution informing him about the mismanaged parking of vehicles in the parking space resulting into inconvenience for all.

The responses of the students were then checked and evaluated, and the errors were listed simultaneously.

DISTINCTIVE ERRORS IN STUDENTS' WRITINGS

Errors are integral components in the learning process, especially when a second language is the target of learning. They serve as a valuable source in understanding the intermediary state of the students' proficiency and limitations. In confirmation to the findings of Weir (1988)[1], students generally show the following characteristic defects in their writing:

- Lack of variety in grammatical structures employed

- Errors pertaining to syntax

- Inappropriate and limited choice of vocabulary

- Poor spelling

- Inappropriate punctuation

- Use of inappropriate prepositions

- Lack of clarity in expression

DATA ANALYSIS

Initially the errors traced in the data were segregated into different categories. Sentence-level grammatical errors committed by the learners involve some syntactic features, namely verbs, relative clauses, articles, fragments, noun modifiers, and prepositions. The errors were considered keeping in mind two broad areas: Inter-lingual errors resulting from language transfer or mother tongue influence on the learner and Intra-lingual errors resulting from erroneous or fractional intake of the second language. The analysis gave out a difference between the learning inputs provided in the classroom and the learning intake of the students. The sample includes the most common errors made by the students of English. Mentioned below are the most frequent error categories with examples from the data.

Analysis of Common Errors in Writing - A Tool for Better Teaching/Learning
of ESL: A Case Study of Amity University Madhya Pradesh

23

Inappropriate Verb Formation

The most common error found in the data was the misuse of verb tenses and aspects. Errors were committed in selecting the appropriate verb form. This seems to be a result of negative transfer from their mother tongue with different concepts of time.

- **Present/Past Perfect Versus Simple Present/Past Verb Tense**

The perfect tense, according to Sidney Greenbaum[2], refers to a situation in past time that is viewed from the perspective of the time of speaking or writing. It is used to indicate an action completed in past with its result or outcome still in effect. ESL students have difficulty understanding the notion of the perfect aspect of the verb. The following examples reflect this category of error.

Examples from the data:

o I was disappointed of what <u>I have seen</u> there and very annoyed of <u>what I have</u> found.

o I do not like the behavior of the juniors and <u>I already complained</u> twice about it.

- **Negative Past Indefinite**

While transforming a sentence in past indefinite tense into negative, the main verb is in its base form (of the infinitive). The auxiliary DIDN'T shows that the sentence is negative AND in the past tense.

But it was found that the students do not understand this, and, while transforming a sentence in past indefinite tense into negative, they use the auxiliary DIDN'T followed by a regular verb in its past tense form (II form)

Examples from the data:

- Students <u>didn't knew</u> about the rules of parking.

- We <u>didn't went there</u> to help the victim.

- **Object of the Verb – to be**

The data discovered that students generally make mistakes in deciding the right object of the verb 'to be'. Many a times they place an adverbial clause immediately after the 'to be' verb. This again might be a result of a negative transfer from the mother tongue.

Examples from the data:

- Peer pressure <u>is when</u> your friends persuade you to do something that you don't like.

- A true friend <u>is when</u> he wants to help you to improve.

OMISSION/ MISUSE OF DEFINITE ARTICLE

Students had difficulty deciding if a definite article is needed for a noun in a particular context. This shows that the students still have difficulty in understanding the concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness in English language usage. In Hindi (their mother tongue) the concepts of definiteness and indefiniteness is entirely different. Definiteness is expressed by the use of demonstrative adjectives. There is no indefinite article. This might be a reason behind the

confusion. However there were only few examples of this category in the recorded data.

Examples from the data:

- Then <u>the Sameer</u> did what he was ordered because of <u>the peer pressure</u>.

- <u>Students</u> of our class find it difficult to handle.

- So many examples <u>in world</u> like Mahatma Gandhi.

SUBJECT – VERB AGREEMENT

'The key to subject-verb agreement is matching the number of both; singular subjects take singular verb forms, as plural subjects take plural verb forms. The subject and verb have to agree in number and person'[3]. Although it appears to be an easy issue to learn in English grammar, yet it is probably the hardest part of the English language to master for new learners. There are some common mistakes found in the data in this area too. This was visible particularly when the subjects of the sentences were pronouns. Many pronouns preceding prepositional phrases change from singular to plural. This is the place where students got confused and made mistakes.

Examples from the data:

- A <u>boy</u> whose friends carry costly mobile phones <u>feel </u>inferior.

- Good <u>personality</u> is important for people and <u>help </u>in professional growth.

OVERLOOKING CO-OCCURRENCE RESTRICTIONS

The research data revealed that the students had difficulty in remembering the fact that definite lexical elements go together with definite complements, prepositions etc. For instance they overlook that the verb phrase 'to be + used to' takes a gerund and not a bare infinitive form of the verb. Wrong use of prepositions was rather redundant in the data.

Examples from the data:

- Students are used to <u>park</u> the vehicle haphazardly.

- We should discuss <u>about</u>…

- Students don't know <u>to</u> park the car properly…

- When we entered <u>into</u> the classroom

- Seniors <u>talk with</u> juniors arrogantly…

IMPROPER PRONOUNS

- **Pronoun – Person and Gender**

    Many students, especially those who had their schooling in Hindi medium or those who had a background that did not provide them with ample opportunities of practicing English after schools, commonly find it difficult to learn the possessive pronoun forms .

Examples from the data:

- Judging <u>a person from its </u>external appearance is wrong.

- **The Third Person Possessive Determiner**

Another common error was spotted in the use of the third person possessive determiners (his/her, its, their). This is probably the result of parallel transfer of language features from their first language. In Hindi, for example, for all possessive determiners the word *"Apna"* is used commonly for all subjects as in *"tum apna kaam karo", "main apna kaam karoon", "wo apna kaam kare"*, etc. Students often construct sentences parallel to the mother tongue and commit errors. They often translate this *"apna"* either as "own" or "our".

Examples from the data:

- Students don't understand <u>own</u> (instead of 'their') responsibility…

- Every student should learn from <u>our</u> (instead of 'his/her') experience as a fresher.

- Peer pressure motivates students to get good marks like <u>our</u> (instead of 'their') friends.

FRAGMENTS FOR SENTENCES

Another common error traced in the data was taking up of fragments for sentences. The error was seen particularly in the use of a dependent clause (starting with a subordinator) to stand alone as a sentence, and in the formation of sentences lacking a proper verb.

Examples from the data:

- For example, some of the bikes parked immediately behind a car.

- Although some of the students do a few things to become a part of the group.

- Still not ready to understand the problem.

REDUNDANCY

William Strunk Jr. remarks in his *'Elements of Style'* "Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell"[4].

Students' assignments reflect some common patterns of redundancy:

- Redundant formation of degree (comparative and superlative)

  - More better…

  - The most poorest…

- Expressions of adverbs and adjectives

  - Often times…

  - External appearance…

DISCUSSIONS

The above analysis clearly confirms that there is a dire need for a better pedagogy for teaching/learning of writing in English, especially in a multilingual country like India. The competence in writing develops through four integral stages starting with the fundamental activity of notation – moving on to the tough task of mastering spellings – to practicing and gaining command in writing and finally – to the complex task of composing where the students require the ability to use all the elements of the language to express themselves, through a written text, that makes sense to the reader. Moreover, students also need to practice different formats and styles that suit variety of purposes of writing, and grammatical and lexical accuracy along with their relevance to the purpose of writing also bear equal importance. There are three integral areas to be focused on for developing a better pedagogy for teaching writing:

- the appropriate method of teaching writing,

- the appropriate method of providing feedback to the students

- the appropriate method of testing students' writing skills, which is undoubtedly the most cumbersome task for teachers

CONCLUSIONS

Errors committed in the process of learning a second language are significant for the reason that they serve the triple function of enlightening the teacher with more relevant areas of teaching, informing the researcher about how the learning advances and by permitting the students to assess their second language acquisition level. When the students methodically receive constructive and encouraging feedback to their writing by the teacher at regular intervals, they feel motivated to improve their skills. Personalized correction and feedback not only give the students an encouragement to improve, but also proper guidance about how to do better. But due to the academic load, syllabus-bound teaching and other co-curricular responsibilities, teachers do not find enough time to correct the writing and provide feedback to the students more than once, or even sometimes not until the final assessment at end-semester exams, eventually finding a lot many red marks all through the answers.

However, if we have a repository of the most common errors that students make while writing in English, the teachers of ESL can plan their teaching methodology, feedback structure and also the modus operandi for testing, with special emphasis on the areas listed in the findings of this research. This will definitely result into a more focused and result-oriented process of teaching/learning of writing.

Moreover, with the heterogeneous mix of students at Amity University Madhya Pradesh - from different states, diverse socio-economic backgrounds, different linguistic competencies – the data collected and the repository of mistakes, thus created, is reliable and applicable for all the teachers of ESL. Through this paper an effort has been made to demonstrate a rudimentary background study done in the field of Error Analysis. It is hoped that the above findings will help the ESL teachers and educators to get familiar with the recurrent mistakes committed by learners and will guide them in making more objective choices about appropriate teaching strategies that would help the students become skilled at writing, and eventually become better performers in domain subjects too.

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